

Why IT Matters to Higher Education

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Designing IT Projects to Advance the Learning Organization

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Rebranding and leveraging IT projects within the library can help promote organizational change and aid in advancing the library as a learning organization.



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For The Ohio State University Libraries, every library initiative is an opportunity to advance as a learning organization. In spring 2016, the libraries undertook a strategic planning process that was designed to incite the kind of organizational thinking and behaviors that the **final framework** would eventually champion: agile and iterative work, inclusive participation, organizational learning, risk-taking and accountability, and shared leadership.¹ Library leadership expected everyone to take responsibility for the creation and realization of shared goals and the ultimate success of the organization.

The Learning Organization

These kinds of organizational values and learning practices characterize what Peter Senge calls the "learning organization," which is adept at creating new knowledge and integrating it into improved work practices. The five disciplines of the learning organization are personal mastery, mental models, shared values, team learning, and systems thinking, with the last being the one that connects them all. Systems thinking is crucial to understanding the interconnectedness of one's individual work and learning with that of the rest of the organization.²

Research has shown a relationship between transformational and transactional leadership practices and the successful development of a learning organization.³ Together, these leadership styles emphasize systems thinking, encouraging organizational exploration and learning (transformation) and the institutionalization of that learning (transaction). For an organization to develop and sustain a learning culture, Senge emphasizes the need for leadership *throughout* the organization, including executive leaders, local line leaders, and internal networkers who may not have any positional authority.⁴

Organizational Learning at The Ohio State University Libraries

When I joined the executive leadership team of University Libraries in fall 2016, I inherited two imminent, highly anticipated "IT projects": a website redesign and the development of a discovery platform. With our organizational learning goals in mind, I rebranded these initiatives as "library projects," signaling to the organization that, as with the strategic planning process, the success of these initiatives would be an organization-wide responsibility. We then restructured these projects to build on the successes of our strategic planning, spurring organizational learning in six areas: communication; collaboration; decision-making; shared leadership; user-centeredness; and agile, iterative planning and operations.

To underscore the organization's collective responsibility for project outcomes and reinforce user-centeredness as a key value, we appointed a website redesign project lead from our Teaching and Learning Department and established a discovery project team with wide representation from across University Libraries. Project sponsors coached project leads on relevant leadership skills such as systems thinking and influencing without positional authority. Sponsors reinforced ideas of collective responsibility and participatory decision-making by encouraging broad staff involvement in project-related events. These projects featured agile and iterative development, design driven by user experience, and incremental release of new content and features. This last practice proved particularly challenging to employees (including executive leadership): we had to adjust to the idea of an "unfinished" and ever-changing product being available for everyone to see, test, and improve upon.

These three projects—creating a strategic framework, new website, and discovery platform—have advanced our practice of shared leadership, participatory decision-making, active engagement, and cross-organizational work and communication.

Organizational Learning Elsewhere

How are other library leaders leveraging IT projects for organizational change? I spoke with five colleagues:

- Salwa Ismail, Associate University Librarian for Digital Initiatives and

Information Technology at the University of California at Berkeley, reflecting on her time as Head of Library Technologies at Georgetown University

- Rosalyn Metz, Director of Library Technology and Digital Strategies at Emory University Libraries
- Hannah Sommers, Associate University Librarian at George Washington University
- Evviva Weinraub, Vice Provost for University Libraries at the University at Buffalo, reflecting on her time as Associate University Librarian for Collection Services and Technologies at Northwestern University
- Carolyn Caizzi, Head of Library, Repository and Digital Curation at Northwestern University

These leaders described seven projects in all, including their organizational learning goals, how projects were designed to advance learning, and their results. They agreed that although organizational learning practices should be a part of everything we do, high-profile, strategically aligned projects that encourage cross-functional engagement provide very visible opportunities to model the practices and behaviors that define a learning organization. IT and technical services projects, in particular, emphasize systems thinking by exposing organizational interconnections, dependencies, and the hard work of developing and maintaining infrastructures that might otherwise be unappreciated.

Learning goals for these projects included exposing hidden work; fostering organization-wide interest and investment; developing leadership skills (decision-making, influence), especially among those without positional authority; building trust in the expertise of others; and developing teamwork skills and cross-organizational interdependence that will endure beyond project end. Emphasizing systems thinking, Weinraub described wanting to "change the organization's mindset from 'IT as plumbing' to 'IT as part of the life of the organization.'" Sommers said a primary goal was to "imagine how we could work together as the most integrated organization we can be where we're better able to back each other up in meaningful ways." Ismail noted that cross-

organizational projects create "environments where we learn from each other . . . creating a collaborative learning culture" that expands capacity and innovation.

Meeting Learning Goals. To meet learning goals, interviewees developed cross-functional project teams to leverage expertise from across the organization while strategically engaging individuals and groups to extend collaboration beyond project end. Some offered training and coaching on specific skills they wanted to promote. George Washington provided coaching on agile development; Northwestern leveraged its years-long organizational focus on Senge's five disciplines. Introducing new partnerships, skills, and work models within the scope of a project takes people out of their comfort zones, creating the real possibility of failure and thus shared responsibility and learning. Several interviewees discussed how they specifically selected project leaders they knew would advance their organizational learning agendas. Northwestern tapped staff from public services and George Washington engaged "internal networkers" to inspire buy-in across the organization. When possible, interviewees sequenced projects so that each subsequent project reinforced the learning outcomes of the last.

Lessons Learned. Because projects were constructed to leverage organizational knowledge and move decision-making to the right people and groups, teams developed trust and self-confidence in their individual and group expertise, as well as the humility to ask for help when needed. Teams also became more agile as collaboration developed, and they tended to iterate in their work as they learned. Purposefully exposing work in progress and revealing interconnections among disparate units' responsibilities contributed to organizational investment. The individuals and units who participated in cross-functional teams became more proactive in reaching out across divisions to communicate and partner, even after project completion. Teams also internalized the lessons of shared leadership: members of George Washington's team observed that leadership is a shared responsibility, everyone leads at different times, good leaders must constantly adapt, delegation is important, and leaders need support too.

Conclusion

Organizational change is hard. All of these projects encountered challenges, including fear of doing things in new ways. Some individuals struggled with working in a team, wouldn't accept the expertise of others, or wanted to dictate solutions rather than collaboratively explore and define challenges and options. Some executive leaders may resist organizational learning practices, which require sharing vision-making and change responsibilities with staff throughout the organization. Yet learning organizations aren't produced via top-down mandates; they require positional leaders to create the conditions for everyone in the organization to envision and create change and then support that growth as it happens. Positional leaders must understand their organization's skills, gaps and culture, plan intentionally, have patience, and know when to get out of the way. Sommers put it succinctly: "My job was to be servant-leader and keep everyone fed."

Learning begets learning. Metz noted: "The further along we move, the more buy-in I see from some members of the leadership team," adding that although major projects "permeate the organization more deeply than smaller projects . . . smaller projects are where the principles identified in the larger projects are best reinforced." The strategies described here provide models for designing projects to advance the learning organization. Our job as leaders is to create an environment where systems thinking and collaborative learning are the norm and where we, in community, develop and integrate new ways of working to achieve our shared values.

Notes

1. Damon Jaggars and DeEtta Jones, "**An Agile Planning and Operations Framework,**" *Performance Measurement and Metrics* 19, no. 2 (April 2018). ↩
2. Peter M Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990), 3, 6–12. ↩
3. Dusya Vera and Mary Crossan, "**Strategic Leadership and Organizational Learning,**" *Academy of Management Review* 29, no. 2 (April 2004). ↩

4. Peter Senge, "**Rethinking Leadership in the Learning Organization**," *The Systems Thinker* 7, no. 1 (February 1996). ↩
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